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News Release

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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has awarded a \$17 million contract to Bouie Construction of Joliet, Ill., to construct the first phase of a national cemetery near Joliet for northeastern Illinois that will be one of the largest in VA's National Cemetery System.

The 150-acre construction project calls for the preparation of 25,000 gravesites, including 2,000 lawn crypts, 3,000 columbaria niches and 2,300 garden niches for cremated remains. The plan also includes an entrance area, a public information center, administration and maintenance facilities, a flag/assembly area, a memorial walkway, three committal service shelters, landscaping, parking, and roadway, utility and irrigation systems.

The 982-acre cemetery site, acquired from the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant, is 50 miles from downtown Chicago. The construction award is part of the estimated \$19.9 million it will cost to open the cemetery, including \$3 million for site preparation. The initial phase is scheduled for completion in 1999.

"The veterans of this nation have earned the honor of burial in a national cemetery," said VA Secretary-Designate Hershel W. Gober. "This cemetery will help make that honor a reality for more than one million veterans and their families in northeastern Illinois. Its construction is one of VA's vital missions -- to establish and maintain dignified burial places for veterans and their families," he added.

Jerry Bowen, director of VA's National Cemetery System, said: "The veterans of this region have worked long and hard for a national cemetery. This contract award begins the work needed to create a national shrine befitting their sacrifice and dedication to our nation."

The contract for the Chicago-area cemetery, which has not been named, was awarded through the Small Business Administration's 8(a) Competitive Program.

With last week's dedication and opening of the Tahoma National Cemetery near Seattle, VA's National Cemetery System now operates 115 cemeteries, of which 57 have available gravesites for new burials and 58 have limited burial services, such as for cremated remains. All are able to inter the spouse or eligible children of a family member already buried.

All veterans with discharges other than dishonorable, their spouses and dependent children are eligible for burial in a national cemetery. VA also provides grave markers or headstones for the unmarked graves of eligible veterans even if they are not buried in a VA cemetery. Information on VA burial benefits is available from national cemetery offices and VA regional offices, which can be reached toll-free at 1-800-827-1000. Information also is available on VA's home page on the Internet at <http://www.va.gov> or the National Cemetery System's home page at <http://www.va.gov/cemetery/index.htm>.